



## College Admissions Essays: A Genre of Masculinity

SARAH-KATE MAGEE

- Magee, Sarah-Kate. "College Admissions Essays: A Genre of Masculinity." *Young Scholars in Writing* 7 (2009): 116–21. Print.

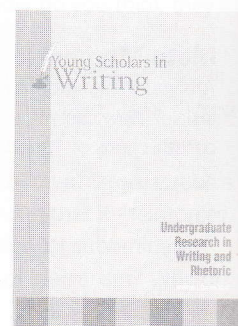
### Framing the Reading

Sarah-Kate Magee wrote this piece while a first-year student at the College of Charleston, where she was double-majoring in arts management and economics and minoring in dance. She wrote it in a course titled Advanced Academic Writing, a first-year writing course (like the one you're probably in while using this book) taught by Chris Warnick.

The question that Magee takes on in her research is part of a larger issue that has long motivated inquiry in writing studies: the role of gender in writing. Sociolinguists like Deborah Tannen have long argued that there are differences in how masculine and feminine genders use language, and scholars of feminist rhetorical theory assert differences in ways of knowing reflected in feminine/women's discourses versus masculine/men's discourses. Given such indications, an obvious question is how gender might express itself in writing. Magee begins her essay by referencing a major existing essay on this question, Elizabeth Flynn's 1988 *College Composition and Communication* article "Composing as a Woman." Magee's contribution is to consider whether an entire genre—in this case, college admissions essays—might be understood as gendered. Might a genre's conventions (the patterns of qualities and characteristics that allow a given genre to be recognized as a *genre* to begin with) actually render the genre more "masculine" or "feminine" as Flynn's work defined these terms?

As you read this article, pay particular attention to its parts or sections: What does each do, and how does each contribute to building Magee's line of reasoning? How would you characterize the methods she uses to address her research question, and do you think you could replicate those methods with other genres or other research questions similar to Magee's?

I have often heard and been skeptical of supposed intellectual or emotional differences between men and women. For example, Lawrence Summers, the past president of Harvard University, suggested that men are better at math and science than women, but my



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own experience refutes this generalization; I'm better at science and math than many men I know. Others I have encountered expect women to be much more emotional and believe they always and automatically want to share their feelings; I am female, and that statement does not describe me. Recently, I read an article that made me think more deeply about gender differences than I had before. I had not considered that men and women might be different in their writing styles until I read Elizabeth Flynn's “Composing as a Woman.” In this article, Flynn suggests that women write differently than men.

Flynn's arguments intrigued me and made me wonder if gender differences do, in fact, exist, and if so, how these are expressed. Flynn explores gender differences in students' personal writing; her findings made me curious about the role gender differences play in college admissions essays. College essays, while personal in nature, are different from the student writing Flynn examined. Will Flynn's argument explain my own college admissions writing? Is my writing really different from that of my male counterparts? Do other young women write differently from their male classmates? Is their style similar to mine?

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## Flynn's Exploration of Gender Differences in Writing

In “Composing as a Woman,” Flynn surveys “feminist research on gender differences in social and psychological development” and theorizes on how such research could be used in examining student writing (425). Flynn drew from Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, and Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing* to build a framework for a feminist consideration of student writing. These writers looked at the differences between men and women, but Flynn took it a step further and applied the differences to writing styles. Flynn describes how Chodorow and the other writers she cites contend that the social and psychological development of men and women is different: men and women “have different conceptions of self and different modes of interaction with others as a result of their different experiences” (426). They argue that men and women interact with the world and view themselves in different ways. Since writing is often personal and can be a reflection of self, it makes sense that such differences would manifest in composing and writing.

In greater depth, Flynn examines Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, in which Chodorow explains the differences between the male and female identification processes: “Feminine identification processes are relational, whereas masculine identification processes tend to deny relationships”

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(176). Women are dependent on other human beings and have no problem admitting it, but men deny those relationships, even if they are dependent on others. Chodorow's claim holds true in the student writing Flynn examined. The narratives of female students are relational—"stories of interaction, of connection, or of frustrated connection." Conversely, men's narratives are "stories of achievement, of separation, or of frustrated achievement" (428). Flynn goes on to characterize female writing in several distinct ways. In women's writing, the emphasis is placed on a shared experience where something relational informs the woman's identity. The conception of self is based on the relationships within the group. For men, she claims, emphasis is placed on achievement on an individual level. The conception of self is based on the individual and his accomplishments, not anything gained from a relational experience.

### Exploring Gender Characteristics in My Writing

As a result of my experiences and many mixed impressions I had about the differences between the genders, I did not automatically believe Flynn's argument about the different characteristics of women's and men's writing styles. I figured that Flynn might be one more person who exaggerates or distorts the differences between men and women. However, her points did not seem as unrealistic as the broad statements I had heard in other conversations, like the mischaracterization that men are superior in math. Flynn was able to convince me that women's narratives are "stories of interaction, or connection" because I see myself focused on forming relationships and connections (428). These connections are more important to me than achieving great accomplishments; my self-image is consistent with Flynn's argument. In order to explore her claims further, I decided to look at a piece of my own writing and see whether and how it fit into her categorization of feminine composition styles. The only example I had of recent narrative-based writing was my college admissions essay. Did my writing fit the feminine qualities Flynn suggests are present in student composition? How did the genre of the piece affect feminine characteristics that might be present in my writing?

My essay begins with my fanciful wish that if I were not bound by space and time, I would reclaim the imagination of a six-year-old and spend twenty-four hours as a Disney princess, specifically Belle. In my narrative, I express my desire for a fairy godmother who would make the objects of my wildest dreams appear while also wondering how "magic" could positively impact our world. Next, I discuss the problem of hunger, both across the globe and down the street. I highlight what I have done as a recruiter for a local Christian Rural Overseas Program (CROP) Hunger Walk to combat the problem. I explain that I would use my princess magic to safely and sustainably feed the world. The essay ends with a revelation that magic or a fairy godmother is not what we need to change the world. It is my compassion, imagination, hard work, determination, and commitment that will make a difference.

If Flynn is correct, and my essay was similar to the female student writing she examined, my college admissions essay—because it has some

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narrative-like characteristics—would tell a story of interaction. However, there are no interactions, no relationships, and no bonding experiences in my admissions essay. The essay does not exhibit the characteristics Flynn suggests are typical of feminist composition. Instead, I write in a manner consistent with masculine composition. I made sure to emphasize my achievements as a recruiter for the CROP Hunger Walk; highlighting accomplishments is typical in the narratives of men, according to Flynn. I could have dismissed Flynn as wrong and misguided; however, her characterization of feminine writing as one focused on relationships fits exactly with my own personal feelings. I was curious why this piece of writing lined up with the masculine characterization since I view myself as a relationship-focused person, instead of one focused on achievements. Since writing can often be a reflection of self, I expected my writing to mirror me as a person and be relationship-focused as well.

I considered the nature and purpose of my personal narrative versus the student writing Flynn studied. There were differences; the essays she examined were exploratory assignments written for school. The students in her study were instructed to write “narrative descriptions of learning experiences” (430). The motivation behind their writing was to write for the classroom; as a college admissions essay, my writing had a very different distinct and specific purpose. It was designed to show myself as more than SAT scores and grades to admissions counselors at schools I wanted to attend. I had to sell myself so that someone at School X would want me to attend his or her institution. It was the genre that influenced both the lack of relationships and the focus on achievements. I had limited words to convince the counselor that I was an impressive person. There was not space for me to talk about the friends I made while recruiting for the CROP Hunger Walk; what was important was that I was a leader and worked hard for a social cause. Those friends were not the ones seeking admission so they should not be included in the essay, and our relationship said nothing about my achievements, or why I would be a valuable addition to School X’s student population.

### Exploring Gender Characteristics in Others’ Writing

Was I alone in my neglect of interactions when writing my essay? Did the essays of other college-bound young women lack relationships and interactions with others while emphasizing achievements? I have examined the admissions essays of two friends, Rosie and Amy, who both have worked hard in high school and want to get into good colleges. I chose them because they value being accepted at prestigious institutions while also having developed very strong relationships and connections with their family and friends. Rosie and Amy gave me permission to use their essays in my study of college admissions essays as a gendered genre and they have reviewed the analyses of their writing that I am presenting. Rosie’s college essay focuses on her mantra “Today, we can conquer the world” and how she applies it to her life daily.



I could conquer the world. At seventeen, conquering the world is not wiping out whole nations and being the newest and most powerful dictator. Conquering the world means learning as much as I can, and pushing myself to be a better, more independent, loving, passionate person. . . . When it came time to choose senior year classes, I didn't look at how often classes met, or ask around about the easy classes. I chose classes like classical mythology, world religions, and explorations in advanced geometry because those sounded interesting to me. Mythology ended up being the hardest class I had ever taken. It was hard, but I was learning with such intensity and in a way I had never done before. I felt like I was conquering the world.

Rosie's essay is also missing relationships and interactions with others. There is no mention of her roommate at the North Carolina School of Science and Math who is her best friend and constant companion. Instead, she highlights how she challenged herself academically and then explains how satisfactory it felt to succeed. She does not include the friend who took the mythology class with her and how they worked together to overcome the challenge. Rosie's only implicit reference to others, "ask around," is not relationship-based, but serves to separate herself from those who might ask others for advice in order to determine the easy classes. Like my narrative, her essay lacks elements of feminine composition and showcases a frustrated achievement, an element of masculine composition.

Amy's admission essay mentions her relationship with others more than either Rosie's or mine; however, she still composes in a masculine style.

I choreographed and taught my first full-length dance this year and I was able to watch my feelings flow through other people's bodies. I also had my first poem published and I have been able to see my words affect other people as they read what I wrote. . . . Other teachers have shown me that sometimes I have to teach myself—such as physics, where I struggled to understand what my teacher was trying to explain, but painstakingly read my textbook, worked extra problems and asked questions until I finally grasped what was going on. . . . So in a word, I am a dreamer. But in many words I am a writer, a reader, a dancer, a planner, and a teacher—because my dreams are not just ideas, they are actions.

Amy underscores her artistic achievements and her frustrated achievements with understanding physics. All of her accomplishments are given in relation to their impact on others, so it would seem that her essay includes interaction. However, the interactions in Amy's essays serve more to emphasize her achievements rather than show her strong bond and connection with others. For example, her choreography is so successful that the dancers are able to show the feelings she intended in their movements. The physics teacher's inability to explain physics gave Amy the opportunity to teach herself, where she struggled and overcame her confusion. Although there are some references to interactions with others, an element of feminine composition, Amy's essay is very much masculine in style because of its heavy emphasis on actions and achievements.

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## College Admissions Essays as a Genre

All of us wrote about topics that made us stand out as leaders and appear independent. Responses that included relationships with others would not present us as independent thinkers ready to embark on new chapters in our lives, which was something we felt we should show in our essays. Some might argue that students could write college admissions essays about experiences where they worked well with others to show that they are team players. Although collaboration is valued in the workforce and in college, admissions counselors are looking for applicants who exhibit leadership while working in groups. Colleges explicitly state that they desire students who demonstrate these qualities.

According to Lafayette College, a prestigious institution of higher education in Easton, Pennsylvania, that is ranked as the thirty-fifth best liberal arts college in the nation by *US News and World Report*, the factors administrators consider in evaluating applications include "the candidate's personal character such as motivation, social awareness, ambition, individualism, and potential for leadership as exhibited through involvement in the community and extracurricular activities" ("Requirements and Class Profile"). Lafayette is not the only institution of higher education that includes personal qualities and leadership in what it is looking for in applicants. Institutions such as Davidson College, Kenyon College, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Virginia Tech, and Harvey Mudd College use a "holistic review" process to evaluate applications and explicitly say they are looking for students who have exhibited leadership experiences.

The application process and application standards make connections, a characteristic of feminine composition, less significant and achievements more significant. Applying to college is in essence a competition—a competition of achievements. The admission process has become lengthy and in-depth because education is valued culturally. Test scores are stressed, extracurricular activities are seen as résumé-builders, and the all-important essay can make or break an application. Strategists and educational experts have cashed in on the market of college admissions. Guidebooks have been written and schools have been thoroughly ranked. When applying to college, I read through several of the essays deemed especially excellent in *50 Successful Harvard Admission Essays* and consulted George Ehrenhaft's *Writing a Successful College Application Essay*.

Pointers Ehrenhaft gives include writing about something important, picking something unique that only you can write about, and managing to boast about your accomplishments without sounding like you are boasting (19). Ehrenhaft advises against writing about summer mission trips because those experiences have become the norm. He suggests that an appropriate topic should relate to an activity you are passionate about, something that "comes from the heart" (16) and, most importantly, should highlight your leadership experience: those two things together make you a competitive applicant. Neither book addresses the difference in how men and women compose or how this difference could influence writing college admission essays. Each book is so specific about what



to write about, accomplishments and achievements, that it eliminates the opportunity to talk about relationships. Those who want to write a successful admissions essay abandon connections even if those relationships are important in their lives.

### Exploring Genre, Purpose, and Gender

Analyzing Rosie's, Amy's, and my college admissions essays, I realized that the college admissions essay genre is more masculine than others. The writing of female writers in this genre has masculine characteristics. In other words, the *genre* seems to influence women's writing style, perhaps in a way that is different from what Flynn accounted for. College essays require students to tell "stories of achievement, separation, or frustrated achievement," no matter what their gender (Flynn 428). A successful college admissions essay must be personal and highlight an achievement or tell how the student struggled and learned something while overcoming that obstacle. The implied expectations of college essays are inherently masculine; "men become the standard against which women are judged" (425).

Does it have to be this way, or has this occurred because of assumptions we have about what is persuasive in an admissions essay? No considerations are made for the differences in how men and women might compose. Should they be? What is considered well done is consistent with the ways men compose; the college admissions essay genre subconsciously requires a masculine style of composition. Why did three young women, who are very connected with others, neglect their relationships and focus only on their achievements when they wrote their college admissions essay? Where did they get the impression that they needed to do that? For that matter, why do *all* writers of admissions essays assume that they must focus only on their achievements?

Interestingly, the prompts for the genre do *not* preclude a wider variety of approaches. A writer's impression of an appropriate focus for his or her essay does not come from the essay questions themselves. The questions are not inherently biased towards masculine composition. The question I responded to was, "If you could go anywhere for twenty-four hours, not limited by time or space, where would you go, what would you do, and why?" I could have written about spending a day with my closest friends and traveling back to Elizabeth Bennet's time. I could have told how such an experience would connect us for years and share how much I value knowing people I can count on. But what would such an essay say about me? I love my friends and *Pride and Prejudice*? It does not say anything about what I could contribute to School X's student population, and why I am a competitive applicant. Rosie's and Amy's essays were free responses and had no guiding prompt. They could have literally written about anything, yet there is no mention of friends or the important relationships in their lives. The *purpose* of college admissions essays—another crucial aspect of the writing context—*does* preclude certain responses.

The admission process is a giant competition, so in one way it makes sense that the college admission essay genre caters to masculine composition

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because, traditionally, competition is associated with masculine values. It almost fits that female students have to write an essay that makes use of masculine qualities, such as achievement. While achievements are important for an admissions counselor to know, they do not describe the overall personality or character of the applicant when an essential aspect of life is ignored. If the point of an essay is to show the applicant as more than just an SAT score or GPA, then the counselor should get the whole picture of the essay's author. Without even realizing it, female students have allowed their writing to mimic masculine composition because the institutions of higher education and the educational experts have clearly told us that accomplishments and achievements are what matters. The college admission genre only furthers the "danger of immasculation" (Flynn 434) by ignoring the differences between masculine and feminine thinking and writing styles and overemphasizing the style that Flynn names as "masculine." Unintentionally, the college admissions essay genre limits what can be written. Unspoken rules guide a successful essay's focus towards achievements. Other experiences, particularly relationship-based experiences, are deemed not appropriate subject matter. There is no awareness of the expectation solely to highlight achievements in college admissions essays, a style of composition Flynn describes as masculine. Such awareness needs to exist to allow for a wider range of experiences to write about in a successful essay. The unintentional bias in the college admissions essays genre only furthers and perpetuates the suppression of women's own ways of thinking and composing.

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### Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. Notice how in many places Magee is deciding what she thinks about various gender claims by comparing a given argument to her own experience. How closely do your own experiences with writing and language fit broadly held gender stereotypes? In which aspects do your experiences break the stereotypes?
2. How long does it take Magee to set up, or explain the origins of, her specific research question and methods of addressing it? What major "moves" does her essay



make in order to get there (what different lines of thought does she pursue one after the next)?

3. Magee is arguing that because women—who, it is theorized, would ordinarily write in a more “feminine” style that emphasized relationships over self and independence—are shown in the essays she examined to be writing in a more “masculine,” non-relational style, that therefore the genre of admissions essays is itself masculinized. What other interpretations of this data could explain it?

### Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. An obvious question about Magee’s study is whether a look at a bigger sample of students and essays would demonstrate the same patterns she found. Write a research proposal that explains how you would “scale up” this research in order to test Magee’s findings with a wider range of writers.
2. Write a retrospective account of how you wrote your own college admission essay(s). How did you decide on what to write about? What factors influenced how you wrote? What process did writing the document take from when you read the prompt(s) for it to when you submitted it? Who else worked on it with you, and what did they contribute? Does your own experience, both in writing and in what you wrote, bear out Magee’s thinking on the admissions essay as a masculinized genre?

#### Meta Moment

Using the description Magee provides (based on Flynn’s work) of what would count as a “masculine” or “feminine” writing style, can you identify which you tend toward?



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